

Water Dispute Threatens Central Asian stability

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Astana is seriously concerned over plans by China to divert several cross-border rivers

Kazakstan could suffer economic and ecological damage as a result of Beijing's plans to divert some of the waters of the Irtysh and Ili rivers into impoverished western China.

Beijing's plans stem from concerns that economic underdevelopment is fueling separatist movements in the Xinjiang-Uigur Autonomous Region, XUAR.

Uigur fighters there have been active for decades, resorting to terrorism to try and carve out a so-called state of Eastern Turkestan. Their proposed state would share borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan and three Central Asian republics.

The Chinese leadership hopes the river diversion project will lead to economic development and raise local standards of living, in the process weakening separatist activities which undermine the stability of the region.

Thus in March, Beijing announced that the development of western China, one of country's most backward regions, would be speeded up as part of the tenth economic five-year plan, which commences in 2001.

"The development of the western regions of the country will play a defining role in the economic and social development of China," said the Chairman of the People's Republic, Jiang Zemin.

At present, the construction of the Black Irtysh-Karamai canal is being hastily completed in the XUAR. It will carry a proportion of the waters of the upper Irtysh to an oil-rich region close to the Uigur town of Urumqi.

The diversion of a proportion of Irtysh and Ili rivers - which flow through Kazakstan and Russia - is intended to supply the XUAR with much needed water resources.

The Chinese initially plan to siphon off 450 million cubic meters of water per year from the Irtysh, with a projected increase to 1.5 billion cubic meters.

Since the total volume of water provided by the Irtysh is approximately 9 billion cubic meters, the planned diversion could have catastrophic consequences not only for the economy and ecology of Kazakstan but also Russia.

If China steps up its use of the Irtysh, the ecological balance in the region of Lake Zaisan, in eastern Kazakstan, will be destroyed. In addition, the reserves of drinking water in the capital Astana and a number of other major towns in the republic will be sharply reduced.

The Kazak economic weekly, *Delovaya Nedelya*, has predicted that a ten per cent increase in water siphoning will strike a heavy blow to the industrial flagships of Kazakstan - the Eastern Kazakstan and Pavlodar region, as well as to the Omsk region of Russia. A series of industrial enterprises could grind to a

halt.

Diverting the Ili could be equally bad for Kazakhstan. This river provides fresh water to the country's largest lake, the Balkhash. It plays a vital role in the economy, providing water for the surrounding population as well as to the metallurgy and energy sectors. The republic's agricultural sector and fishing industry would also suffer.

Balkhash Lake plays a key role in the climactic balance of both south-east and central Kazakhstan. The shallowing and salting of the lake could spawn an ecological tragedy like that of the Aral Sea, which dried up as a result of human intervention.

But perhaps saddest of all is that the Irtysh and the Ili seem to be the first of many such projects. Beijing is reported to be considering the diversion of waters from many other cross-border rivers. Vladimir Babak of the Institute of Russian and Eastern European Research at Tel Aviv University estimates that more than 30 rivers that flow from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan are being considered.

Astana has sought to raise its concerns over the river diversion plans with Beijing, but, it seems, China is likely to make every effort to further its policy. The existing distribution of power in the region clearly favours China and Beijing is taking every opportunity to preserve its dominant position.

Talks between the two countries have so far foundered on China's insistence that other parties should be excluded. A demand that inevitably weakens Kazakhstan's position.

All interested parties should be included, first and foremost Russia and Kyrgyzstan, as this would neutralise China's current advantage, creating a fairer negotiating process. A mechanism for such talks already exists in the form of the 1996 five-sided Shanghai Agreement between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At present, it is about the only treaty structure offering a framework for those interested in regulating cross-border rivers.

The issue of water distribution from the Irtysh and Ili is definitely a matter for the states through which the rivers flow, but the problems which could arise from the current dispute could require the full attention of the international community.

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